

Building Blocks for Effective Housing Elements

Public Participation

Government Code 65583(c)(7) "The local government shall make a diligent effort to achieve public participation of all economic segments of the community in the development of the housing element, and the program shall describe this effort."

Housing issues affect the entire community – residents, employers and the public and private sectors. The public participation requirement of housing element law presents an opportunity to engage constituents in a dialogue – defining problems and creating solutions. The inclusion of community stakeholders in the housing element public participation process helps ensure appropriate housing strategies are more efficiently and effectively evaluated, developed, and implemented. An inadequate public participation process may lead to community conflict or in worse case scenarios, anti-development initiatives, and NIMBYism. Successful public participation is important because a diverse cross section of the population can be engaged in defining the housing problem and in crafting community sensitive solutions. Another benefit of broad participation and true engagement of the public is that when it is time to adopt housing strategies and approve housing developments, a greater portion of the community has been involved and participated in the plan and more frequently will support its implementation. Meaningful participation creates stakeholders in the ultimate outcome of the process.

I. REQUISITE ANALYSIS

- The jurisdiction must make a diligent effort to include all economic segments of the community and/or their representatives in the development and update of the housing element.
- The element should clearly describe how public participation was encouraged (types of outreach, meetings, etc.) throughout the development and implementation of the housing element process.
- Describe who was invited to participate, which groups actually participated, general comments received and how comments were incorporated into the housing element.
- Describe any ongoing efforts to engage the public and stakeholders in the implementation of the housing element.

Who Should Participate?

- Involve low- and moderate- income residents to discuss problems faced and resources needed.
- Seek housing needs and conditions information from a wide variety of housing consumers and service providers such as tenants in units at-risk of conversion, health and human service providers, homeless shelter and mental health service providers, places of worship, seniors, farmworkers, and non-and for-profit affordable housing developers.
- Invite other stakeholder groups into the housing element development and implementation processes. These might include local or regional business groups such as the Chamber of Commerce which are concerned about the availability of housing for employees and how housing availability affects regional economic growth. Other stakeholders could include grass roots community based organizations, neighborhood associations, homeowner/resident organizations and civic groups such as the League of Women Voters, Rotary Clubs, etc.
- By including development and finance professionals in the housing element process, the constraints to housing development (land availability, regulatory environment, and financing concerns, etc.) can be identified based on real world experience. Appropriate responses and strategies can then be collaboratively developed.
- Local governments should promote involvement of all appropriate local departments to ensure interdepartmental issues are addressed in a comprehensive and efficient manner. The public works department may be able to provide information about infrastructure issues, the codes department may have information about the condition of the housing stock, and effective strategies to housing problems may require more participation than the planning department.

Approaches to Public Participation

- Identify key individuals who can represent their constituent communities during all stages of the housing element process.
- Be proactive by reaching out to the community by visiting neighborhoods and participating in local events. Establish an ongoing housing element update and implementation committee using an appointed, ad-hoc, or volunteer citizen advisory committee to oversee the update and implementation of the housing element.

- Direct mail, radio spots (PSAs) and local print media such as a neighborhood newsletter can be used to communicate opportunities to engage in the housing element process.
- Always consider the ethnic composition of the target audience and use communication tools that are language-appropriate and culturally sensitive.
- Design and post a website to provide an easy-to-access interactive platform for the housing element process, especially during the update process. The website can include a survey which is easy to complete by participants, and their responses easy to convert into a form for analysis. The website can also include a housing element public participation blog. A “blog” is a web-log, an on-line written conversation allows for a user to record a larger amount of comments than a simple survey; this can reveal a greater sense of emotion towards housing needs and plans for development.
- Once initial community input has been received, provide draft copies of the housing elements to all stakeholders.
- Use creative methods to communicate the importance of all stages of the housing element process.
- Use attractive direct-mail brochures and surveys to capture information.
- Consider mobile resources (e.g, the City of Richmond’s “Plan Van”) with interactive presentations during the input and implementation stages. This is a good way to be present in different neighborhoods and engage participation.
- Consider having barbeques or set up information displays at community events throughout the process to enhance interaction with the public. It is very important to “show up” at community functions both to make connections at the neighborhood level, but also to create opportunities to engage people in their own community.
- Conduct guided tours of both market-rate and affordable housing developments to show visual comparisons and generate housing project ideas.
- Conduct training and education workshops; workshop participation will identify key individuals who may be interested in taking a community leadership role in the housing element process, and can be used to gather community input.

- Create computer simulations of housing project proposals showing all types and locations of “virtual housing.”
- Encourage ongoing participation by conducting annual public meetings to discuss housing needs and priorities, development successes and the need for additional resources. Continuing involvement emphasizes the importance of the public’s role in effective implementation.

KEY IDEAS

II. HELPFUL HINTS

During Outreach and Implementation

- Anticipate logistical concerns. Public participation can be impeded by language barriers, transportation, meeting times and child care. Minimize these barriers by anticipating concerns in advance of events scheduled to encourage participation. Plan to address as many concerns as possible. For example:
 1. plan some meetings in the evening and/or on weekends;
 2. provide childcare;
 3. plan the meetings in locations accessible by public transit or assist in transportation; and
 4. provide translation services.
- Seek input to the housing element early in the development, implementation and oversight stages.
- Follow-up is important. After holding a public forum or activity, establish a procedure to follow-up with concrete action to address the community’s concerns. Be sure that all information relevant to the process is made available, either at regular meetings or by posting to a website. This will help to establish and maintain the jurisdiction’s credibility.

Facilitate Meaningful Participation

- Develop a public participation infrastructure that includes the following resources to promote sustainable community involvement in the housing element planning, review and implementation process:
 1. A contact person who is available to the public to answer questions, respond to concerns and provide information about resources.
 2. An interactive website where stakeholders could access information and voice ideas and concerns.
 3. Annual meetings where stakeholders can gather to celebrate successes in housing development, learn about local land-use and development issues, voice concerns and develop a vision for future housing development.
- Conduct effective meetings and establish rapport early. Build consensus among stakeholders, the public, professionals, and local decision-makers. Help the group move from decision-making based on personal experience alone, and toward making decisions that are in the interest of the whole community. Effective meetings with the public will:
 1. Maintain integrity by demonstrating willingness to follow-up on concerns and incorporating input.
 2. Develop rules for engagement. Every participant should agree to the same set of rules and protocols.
 3. Respect community values and concerns. Acknowledge the sincerity of expressed views.
 4. Bring directly affected stakeholders into the process as soon as possible. This facilitates the creation of teamwork earlier in the process and communicates the process is inclusive.
 5. Be willing to listen. Being patient and listening to all viewpoints, especially when the process breaks down, is valuable to restart the process and gain credibility with the participants.
 6. Demonstrate willingness to consider and incorporate stakeholder input. The public participation process should not be used to “rubber stamp” a predetermined objective or policy.

7. Present all information and data in a format that is easily understood.
Take time to ensure the public understands critical information.
Encourage questions.

III. MODEL ANALYSES

[Sample Analysis](#)

IV. LINKS

[HCD: Public Participation and Community Engagement: Selected Resources](#)

[HCD: NIMBY to YIMBY Presentation](#)

[Regional Housing Needs, Blueprint 2001 for Bay Area Housing](#)

[League of California Cities: Community Participation Strategies: Community Participation in the Housing Element Process](#)

[League of California Cities: Resources on Public Participation](#)

[Local Government Commission: Resources on Public Participation](#)

[International Association for Public Participation: Public Participation Toolbox](#)

[University of Wisconsin, Stevens Point, Center for Land Use Education: "Crafting an Effective Plan for Public Participation"](#)

[The Campaign for Affordable Housing: Resources and Publications](#)

[Non-Profit Housing Association of Northern California \(NPH\): Toolbox for Community Acceptance](#)

[CSUS Center for Collaborative Policy: Conditions Needed to Sustain a Collaborative Policy Process](#)

[CSUS Center for Collaborative Policy: Five Stages of Collaborative Decision Making on Public Issues](#)

[The Ontario Plan: A framework for the Future](#)

[Justice Policy Institute: Report on Housing and Public Safety](#)